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Recluse won't tell what he knows of '63 assassination

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SPECIAL TO THE HOUSTON POST

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Living today as a virtual recluse on an island in the Mississippi River is a man who could answer a lot of questions about one of the darkest days in American history.

If he would.

What John Franklin Elrod has kept bottled up inside for nearly three decades concerns the Nov. 22, 1963, death of President John F. Kennedy and the possible relationship between the man accused of killing him, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the televised fatal shooting two days later of Oswald by Jack Ruby in the garage of the Dallas Police Department.

The little that Elrod, now 60, will say hints that:

■ Oswald and Ruby did know each other before the shootings.

■ Elrod shared a jail cell with Oswald and another man after Kennedy's assassination, and the wounding of Texas Gov. John Connally.

■ Oswald told Elrod of a meeting between Ruby and four other men only a few days before Kennedy's death.

■ Dallas police lied to the Warren Commission investigating Kennedy's death, saying Oswald had been kept in isolation and never talked to anyone except law enforcement investigators.

■ The FBI in both Dallas and Memphis either purposely hid the Oswald-Elrod link, or chose to ignore it.

■ Elrod then, and now almost 30 years later, fears greatly for his life.

What Elrod does say — that he knew, albeit briefly, Oswald and that

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CONTRADICTORY REPORTS

He stated that on several occasions he has had difficulty remembering due to his extreme use of alcohol. He knew nothing concerning the assassination of the President, the involvement of JACK RUBY in the killing of HARVEY LEE OSWALD, or of any information concerning the possibility of the receipt of money by JACK RUBY, except the hearsay information he had received from his unknown cellmate.

This excerpt from the Aug. 11, 1964, report of Memphis-based FBI agents Norman L. Casey and Francis B. Cole on their interview with John Franklin Elrod in the Shelby County Sheriff's Office in Memphis, Tenn., indicates they viewed him with suspicion, and that he could not identify his Dallas cellmate nine months earlier.

This subject walked into our office at approximately 12:30 A.M., this date, and stated he had information concerning the murder of Lee Oswalt. He had with him a travel bag which contained a sawed-off shotgun.

This excerpt from a letter to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover by Alton C. Gilless Jr., then a Shelby County sheriff's sergeant and today the sheriff himself, shows Elrod did in fact know something of Oswald (Oswalt). Gilless' letter was also written on Aug. 11, 1964.

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OSWALD: Cellmate won't tell what he knows of assassination

From A-29

Oswald told him of knowing Ruby, the small-time mobster and strip club owner, is enough to send assassination conspiracy theorists into high gear — particularly with the 30th anniversary of the president's death coming this month.

Ruby's shooting of accused presidential assassin Oswald before the eyes of millions of people watching on television and those in the packed basement garage of the Dallas police station set off an immediate rash of speculation.

Ruby silenced Oswald to keep him from talking, was the central conspiracy theme. That was fueled by rumors of pre-assassination sightings of Oswald and Ruby huddled in conversation somewhere, often at a table in Ruby's own downtown Carousel Club.

If true, that would contradict the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald and Ruby acted as two "lone nut" assassins, each in a separate world of derangement.

Elrod's contention today is directly opposite the commission's finding. It is backed by a law enforcement paper trail dating back to his time in jail in Dallas with Oswald and to Aug. 11, 1964, when he walked into the Shelby County (Tenn.) Sheriff's Office to turn in a sawed-off, double-barreled 12-gauge shotgun.

Elrod's story began to surface in February 1992 with the discovery of five Nov. 22, 1963, arrest records in the Dallas police files.

Three arrest records revealed for the first time the identities of the enigmatic "three tramps," whom many conspiracy theorists suspected of being disguised assassins. They had been known only from media photos taken moments after the assassination as the suspects were marched from railroad yards behind Dealey Plaza to the Dallas County Sheriff's Office.

Assassination sleuths saw in the pictures future Watergate burglars E. Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis and future judicial hitman Charles Harrelson. In reality and reported first in The Houston Post last year, the men were Harold Doyle, Gus Abrams and John Forrester Gedney, all actual rail-riders, circa 1963.

The two other records were for Elrod and Donald Wayne Douglas, a man who had the bad timing to go to police to confess to a Tennessee car theft but who ended up charged with suspicion of murder.

Elrod's record shows he was apprehended at about 2:45 p.m. as he walked along railroad tracks near Harry Hines Boulevard, some 2½ miles north of downtown Dallas and the Dealy Plaza presidential shooting site. A few minutes before his arrest, police had been alerted that a man "carrying a rifle" was seen in the vicinity. Elrod was not armed but was the only person in sight.

He was placed in a fifth-floor jail cell for investigation of conspiracy to murder the president. He was described as "unemployed." However, although he had a history of an alcohol problem, Elrod was at the time working as a restaurant cook and had a satisfactory employment record.

"John told me he was in the same cell with Lee Harvey Oswald, and that he knew Oswald didn't kill Kennedy," says Lindy Elrod, who managed the Oak Lawn restaurant where his younger brother worked and who was called to pick him up from the downtown jail on Nov. 24, 1963. "He was very scared about something that happened."

"He made a 180-degree turnaround and left me in the lurch — never came back to his job," Lindy Elrod says.

A few days after his release John Elrod fled Dallas to the Memphis area. He has not set foot back in Texas.

Nine months later, on Aug. 11, 1964 — a Tuesday — Elrod showed up at the Shelby County Sheriff's Office in Memphis shortly after midnight carrying the sawed-off 12-gauge in a travel bag. When the deputies heard what he had to say, they called the FBI.

Memphis Bureau agents Norman L. Casey and Francis B. Cole closeted themselves with Elrod in the sheriff's office that morning. Their two-page report of the interrogation went unnoticed for 28 years, until released in October 1992 through a Freedom of Information request by a Silicon Valley computer programmer and part-time Kennedy assassination researcher, Bill Adams.

← ORIGINALLY 'REDISCOVERED'

Agents Casey and Cole reported Elrod was troubled by the events surrounding Kennedy's assassination, but that he knew nothing about it. They referred to his cellmate as "unknown." They also noted he had a drinking problem.

That same day, Shelby County Sheriff's Sgt. Alton C. Gilless Jr. prepared a report of his own. In the report to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Gilless, today the sheriff, wrote of Elrod: "The subject walked into our office at approximately 12:30 a.m., this date and stated he had information concerning the murder of Lee Oswalt (Oswald)."

Gilless' report to Hoover was not made available to the Warren Commission.

The FBI today declines to comment on the contradiction. Its Washington headquarters declines to discuss any aspect of the Kennedy assassination, referring questions instead to Oliver Revell, Special Agent in Charge of the Dallas FBI field office. A spokeswoman for Revell said Friday that the bureau there does not want to comment either.

While Casey and Cole generally discounted Elrod's information there was something in their report of his interview that — coupled with Gilless' to Hoover — should have sent the red flags flying. It was:

"The cellmate stated that five men had met at a motel, and they had been advanced some money under some type contract. ... that this cellmate at some time had told him that one of the men who had been at the motel referred to had been Jack Ruby."

The report also noted Oswald had identified to Elrod another man who had been at the motel meeting after he and Elrod had seen the man being led by law officers through the Dallas jail hallway.

That would be Lawrence Reginald Miller, then 33, who had been arrested Nov. 18, 1963, after a high-speed chase through downtown Dallas. Arrested with him was the driver of the car, Donnell Darius Whitter, then 43. Both were suspects in the theft of military weapons from a National Guard Armory near Terrell.

Miller received four years in the federal penitentiary in Texarkana. He died of acute alcohol intoxication at age 43 and was found in an apartment owned at the time of Kennedy's assassination by Bertha Cheek, a Ruby associate and the sister of Oswald's last landlady, Earlene Roberts.

Whitter ~~was employed by~~ * Ruby as a car mechanic. Evidence compiled by Dallas-based journalist Seth Kantor, Warren attorneys Burt W. Griffin and Leon D. Hubert Jr. and other investigators has long linked Ruby with gun-running activities intended to furnish arms for anti-Castro Cuban groups.

Whitter received a four-year term and was sent to the federal prison hospital in Springfield, Mo. He died in 1991 in Temple.

Despite Whitter's death and the recent release of nearly 1 million pages of assassination-related materials, he remains a restricted subject. The FBI has not granted the National Archives permission to make public a 14-page document on Whitter.

* SHOULD BE 'DID WORK FOR'
PLM